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ABSTRACT

A survey of persons who wrote letters to the Cleveland public television station regarding the Watergate hearings revealed that presentation of the Senate hearings improved PTV's image in the minds of some viewers. A content analysis of the letters written to the station indicated that 49 percent of the writers specifically stated support for public affairs type programing. The survey does, however, cast some doubt on optimistic predictions of a new-found public television audience of contributors. Those who reported watching public television before the hearings began generally reported that their level of viewing had not changed after the Watergate hearings. Likewise, although a slight trend was noted, there were no significant relationships between how a viewer's attitude toward public television was affected by the hearings and any subsequent willingness to contribute to public television. These factors of viewer continuity and contribution should be of particular interest, because this population consisted of persons who were committed enough to their opinions about the coverage of the Senate hearings to write letters expressing these opinions. (Author/TO)

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THE AUDIENCE OF PUBLIC TELEVISION:

DID WATERGATE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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Television coverage of Senator Sam Ervin's Watergate Committee Hearings was a rare phenomenon in American broadcast history. Initially, all three commercial networks carried the Hearings from gavel to gavel, then they rotated the daily coverage between them. This rotating coverage continued until the late-July recess in the Committee's hearings. From the first day of the Hearings, however, one network, the Public Broadcasting System, aired daily gavel to gavel coverage. Replaying in the evening the day's Hearings in their entirety, public television continued its broadcasts when the Hearings reconvened after the late summer recess.

According to Ben Bagdikian, the coverage of the Hearings "was probably the most important thing that has happened to noncommercial public affairs reporting since its (public television's) founding. The Hearings established public television as a realistic alternative to commercial broadcasting in the minds of an important new audience.[2] Bagdikian reported that 92% of all public television affiliates carried the Hearings. Those stations that refused to broadcast the Hearings at first were forced by local demand to air them. Mail at the Public Broadcasting System was 98% favorable.

Coverage of the Watergate Hearings was a boost to public television's ratings as well. A Florida survey[3] indicated that 8% of the people who watched the Hearings watched them on public television. Public television's usual prime time rating of 1% (approximately 1,300,000 viewers) tripled to nearly four million viewers. Bagdikian reported that one affiliate, WNET in New York City, received a rating of 7.6, its highest ever.

If the evening coverage of the Watergate Hearings was such a significant event in the life of public television, it is important to assess exactly what effect in terms of programming, audience and finances that coverage had.

While Bagdikian stated that some affiliates were unwilling to air programming embarrassing to the Nixon Administration (in light of Administration attacks on the airing of public affairs programming on public television[4]), James Karayn, the president of the National Public Affairs Center for Television, said that the Hearings gave the affiliates new confidence in the airing of such controversial public affairs programming.[5] One question, then, is did the viewing audience approve of this type of public affairs programming on public television per se? Likewise, if the image of public television was enhanced in the viewers' minds as a result of airing the Hearings, did this improved image result in the creation of a new, larger audience? Along these same lines, did coverage of the Hearings result in added contributions to the public television stations?

Hypotheses

Based on the information presented, the following hypotheses were developed and tested:

1. As gauged by a content analysis of letters sent to a public television station, viewer opinion will be highly in favor of coverage of the Hearings on public television, per se.
2. Viewer response will be significantly in favor of unabridged, evening coverage.
3. Viewing of the Hearings on public television will result in

increased viewing of public television other than the Hearings.

4. Positive increases in viewer attitudes toward public television will result in increased viewing and increased contributing.

Method

To examine the relationship between public television's airing of the Watergate Hearings and viewer reaction, 1110 letters that had been received by WVIZ-TV, a Public Broadcasting System affiliate in Cleveland, Ohio, were analyzed in terms of their content and, where possible, the letter-writers were contacted by telephone and interviewed by trained interviewers.

Results: Content Analysis

The mail response was overwhelmingly in favor of the public television coverage of the Hearings. 1060 letters of support were received as opposed to 50 letters that expressed a negative attitude toward the nightly coverage. The content analysis of the major themes of the letters (Table 1) indicated that many letter-writers took the opportunity to express more than a simple like or dislike opinion of public television's Watergate coverage.

TABLE I

As can be seen from this content analysis of the letters, not only were those who watched the Hearings on public television overwhelmingly in favor of continued coverage, but Themes 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 12 demonstrated that a sizable portion of this population, 48.7%, were motivated enough to write letters expressing the significance that they attached to the airing of the Hearings by public television, per se. At least as far as those people who took time to write to this particular

public television station were concerned, the public television audience for the Hearings appeared to be enthusiastic in its support for the broadcasts.

Results: Telephone Survey

Those who mailed letters to WVIZ-TV were contacted by telephone from October 8 to October 12 by trained interviewers and were asked questions designed to obtain information as to their perceptions of public television and its coverage of the Hearings, as well as significant demographic information. Of the 1110 possible respondents, 416 were excluded because financial limitations made calling "long-distance" subjects impossible. 187 letter writers did not sufficiently identify themselves to be contacted, or no phone number could be found for the indicated name. This reduced the number of respondents to 507. Each individual was called until he or she answered or until four callbacks had been made. With 158 no answers or "non-cooperatives," the final number of respondents from whom completed interviews were obtained was 350.

The interviewers were instructed to question, where possible, the person who had written the letter. That is, if the woman of a particular household wrote the letter, she was interviewed; likewise, if the man of a particular household wrote the letter, it was he who was questioned.

Responses to demographic questions revealed that respondents were more likely to be women (65%); they were likely to be highly educated (77% had attended college or were college graduates); they were more likely to identify themselves as Democrats (54% Democrats, 21% Republicans, 20% Independents); and they were more likely to have voted for McGovern (64%

McGovern voters, 25% Nixon voters). These data indicated that the Watergate Hearings were not attracting a broad or heterogeneous audience to public television. Certainly those who wrote letters did not reflect a cross-section of the city of Cleveland. A disproportionally large number of women, college graduates and McGovern voters were apparently strongly attracted by the coverage.

Respondents were asked several questions to ascertain their opinions about previous and future television coverage of the Watergate Hearings. These responses are reported in Table II. These responses indicate that

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TABLE II

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respondents overwhelmingly approved of the coverage given the Watergate Hearings. By a two to one margin, they believed that gavel to gavel coverage was essential. A substantial majority believed that abridged coverage was not sufficient. More than 90% of the respondents believed that evening coverage of the Hearings was necessary.

Despite the overwhelming vote of confidence in television coverage of the Hearings and for evening coverage in particular, it is interesting to note that when respondents were asked about their public television viewing habits, before the Hearings began and their public television habits now, a slight decline in viewing can be noted (see Table III).

TABLE III

Although the viewing of 35 persons increased, the viewing of 46 persons

decreased. While not significant, this decline indicates that coverage of the Hearings did not attract regular viewers to public television. It could be expected that those persons who most favored coverage of the Hearings by public television would be the most likely to become more regular viewers of public television. Yet in this very partisan group of respondents such a trend toward regular viewing cannot be found. This somewhat surprising result should give public television planners some cause for concern. It may be that coverage of the Hearings had disrupted normal patterns of viewing, resulting in less frequent viewing. This conclusion should be viewed with some caution, however, because when this survey was taken in early October, the local PBS affiliate station was only beginning its fall season. Reduced viewing may have been the result of scheduling or program changes, not disruption of viewing patterns by the Hearings.

Another finding of interest was that many respondents stated that they had become more favorable in their opinion toward public television as a result of the coverage of the Hearings. Respondents were asked: "Has the fact that Channel 25 carried the Hearings changed your opinion of public television (educational television)? How?" Less than 2% reported that their opinion had become very negative; less than 3% reported that their opinion had become a bit negative; 41% reported that their opinion was unchanged; 22% said their opinion had become a bit positive and 31% said that their opinion had become very positive. Thus, the "image" of public television in the minds of many viewers may have improved considerably. It is important to assess whether this improved "image" had any positive practical consequences. Can people who reported changes of opinion in a positive direction be expected to view public television

more regularly? Will they be more likely to contribute to the support of public television?

An examination of our data revealed that the improved "image" of public television did not appear to have positive practical consequences. Respondents who expressed differing opinion changes with regard to public television were compared as to whether they indicated that their viewing of public television had increased or decreased and as to whether they had contributed to the support of Channel 25. We were particularly fortunate to have conducted this survey immediately after a fund raising drive by Channel 25. Thus, we were able to confirm whether respondents had actually contributed. Tables IV and V report results. These findings indicated that persons whose opinions of public television improved greatly were slightly more likely to increase their viewing of Channel 25. However, in every other category of opinion change, the number of viewers declined. The data also indicated that respondents whose opinion toward public television improved were not more likely to contribute. In fact, those whose opinions remained unchanged were more likely to contribute. It may be that those whose opinions toward public television have only recently improved will contribute in future campaigns. Also, we did not ask whether respondents had contributed previously. There may be more new contributors among those whose opinion of public television has improved. Future research should explore these possibilities. However, on the basis of the data at hand, it appears that coverage of the Hearings has done little to alter pre-existing patterns of viewing or contributing.

TABLES IV AND V

Thus, the data confirmed hypotheses one and two, but failed to substantiate hypotheses three and four.

Discussion

It is apparent from these data that the public television coverage of the Senate Watergate Hearings went a long way toward improving that medium's image in the minds of those who viewed. This sample demonstrated wide support for the coverage on public television.

Also, as the content analysis indicated, nearly 49% of the letter-writers felt strongly enough about this particular public affairs program on public television to write a letter specifically stating support for such programming. It is probably safe to assume that a large portion of the remaining 51% share those feelings, although they did not specifically state so in their letters. Mr. Karayn's statement that affiliates found new confidence in the programming of public affairs would, then, seem justified. Apparently, viewer sentiment is on their side.

The data do, however, cast some doubt on glowing predictions of a new-found public television audience; an audience willing to contribute money. Those who reported watching public television before the Hearings began generally reported watching at a similar level after the Hearings. Likewise, although a slight trend was noted, there were no significant relationships between how a viewer's attitude toward public television was affected by the Hearings and any subsequent willingness to contribute to public television. This last point takes on added credibility when it is remembered that station records verified whether an individual had or had not contributed, eliminating the likelihood that a person who

had not given would be recorded as having contributed.

The factors of viewer continuity and contributions should be of particular interest, because this sample was drawn from a group of people who were committed enough to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction of public television's coverage of the Hearings to write the station letters expressing their feelings.

A possible weakness with the present study lies in the fact that it deals with only one station. The lack of viewer continuity and the absence of a relationship between attitude toward public television and contributions might be a function of the station. Possibly, in spite of the Hearings, the people simply felt that this particular station was not worthy of their financial support. On the other hand, the station may have been so worthy of support that viewer attitudes toward the coverage of the Hearings had little to do with subsequent contributions.

Nonetheless, further research should be instituted to examine in detail the effects of the Watergate Hearings coverage on public television.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Both authors are Assistant Professors of Communication at The Cleveland State University.

[2] "Newspapers: Learning (Too Slowly) to Adopt to TV," Columbia Journalism Review, 12:44-51 (November/December 1973).

[3] A Communication Research Center (Florida State University) survey conducted in May and June 1973 in Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Tampa, St. Petersburg and Miami. Reported in Public Telecommunications Review, 1:7 (August 1973).

[4] The President's Office of Telecommunication Policy chairman, Clay T. Whitehead, is on record as saying, "There are, I think, serious questions of principle as to whether Federal funds should be involved when funding public affairs, because here you're taking the tax payers' money and using it to express points of view, which inevitably is going to be opposite the point of view of many citizens." Quoted in John J. O'Connor, New York Times, February 11, 1972.

[5] Columbia Journalism Review, op. cit., p. 46.

TABLE I

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF WATERGATE LETTERS
BY MAJOR THEME OF LETTER

THEME	NUMBER	%
1. Congratulation in general for coverage	340	32.0
2. Evening broadcasts are service to those who cannot watch during the day	167	15.0
3. Coverage is vital public service	117	10.5
4. Coverage demonstrates people's right (duty) to know	72	6.7
5. Coverage of Hearings is essence of public television	58	5.2
6. Other program suggestions and comments	50	4.5
7. Coverage is necessary if democracy is to survive	36	3.2
8. Public television needs hearings, networks cannot do the job	34	3.0
9. Congratulation in general for public television	34	3.0
10. Hearings show government (Constitution) at work	32	2.8
11. Hearings show Administration corruptness	32	2.8
12. Coverage of Hearings is history in the making	26	2.3
13. Coverage in full is the only way to get at the truth (no bias)	23	2.0
14. Public television should resist Administration pressure to alter programming	18	1.6
15. Other (Positive)	32	3.0
16. Other (Negative)	28	2.6
TOTAL	1000	100.0%

TABLE II

Question	Response		
	Yes	No	No Answer
Is coverage of the Hearings essential?	298	43	9
Is gavel to gavel coverage essential?	238	105	7
Would an abridged version each evening suffice?	125	209	16
Is there a need for evening coverage?	315	26	9

TABLE III

Frequency of PTV Viewing Before and After the Hearings Coverage*

Watch Channel 25 Before	Watch Channel 25 Now		
	Not at all	Sometimes	Quite a bit
Not at all	16	12	1
Sometimes	11	131	22
Quite a bit	1	34	110

* 12 Respondents did not answer at least one of these questions

TABLE IV

Change In Opinion of PTV and Change in PTV Viewing Patterns*

Viewing Pattern Change	Opinion Change				
	Very Neg	Bit Neg	No Change	Bit Pos	Very Pos
View more frequently	1	2	10	6	16
View less frequently	0	1	26	8	11
View the same amount	2	5	106	62	81

* 13 Respondents did not answer at least one of these questions

TABLE V

Change in Opinion of PTV and Contributions to PTV*

Contributions Made	Opinion Change				
	Very Neg	Bit Neg	No Change	Bit Pos	Very Pos
Yes	3	5	71	72	60
No	2	4	65	31	44

* 23 Respondents did not answer at least one of these questions